

## Jon Garelick's Giant Steps

writings about jazz, etc.

### Donal Fox with Maya Beiser at the ICA

By Jon Garelick | April 12, 2013

Twenty years ago, the Boston pianist and composer Donal Fox used to spend a bit of time on stage explaining his procedure for fusing his twin passions: jazz and classical music. It was useful and enlightening (“Bach to the Blues,” “Bach and Monk,” Scarlatti and whoever), but it also had an air of pushing a lima bean on a reluctant child. Now, after decades of his own work — in addition to that of people like Uri Caine, Brad Mehldau, and, oh, the entire New England Conservatory Contemporary Improvisation department — Fox maybe feels less need to explain, or apologize. At the ICA Thursday, in a program called “Piazzolla to Bach and Beyond,” he played solo and in a duo with the Israeli cellist Maya Beiser. Fox was as usual a genial host, but he limited his introductions to the titles and composers of the pieces that we were about to hear, no explanation necessary.



For those who, like me, are used to seeing Fox with a band, his opening 20-minute solo section was revelatory. In the Fox manner, he used pieces by Dowland, Brahms, Handel, and Monk as source material for improvisation. He took the first number, Dowland’s “Flow My Tears” fairly straight, but here were hints of what would impress for the rest of the night: his touch, tone, and sensitivity to dynamics, his compositional attention to chord voicings, his swing (even in non-swing material). The Dowland chestnut had the kind of stately polyphonic grace typical of the Renaissance, and the melancholy that is distinctly Dowland, as well as some grand fortissimo drama.

By the time he got to Handel’s Passacaglia in G minor, all of Fox’s talents were on display – that rising and falling dynamic contrast, propulsive melodic variations in the right hand driven by rock-solid ostinatos in the left. In fact, making the most of the passacaglia form, Fox had figures in his left and right hand singing to each other. That kind of call-and-response was the hallmark of the evening. Also typical of Fox, “Autumn Leaves” began wandering into the Handel.

Another sea change in the nature of music programming was indicated by Monk’s “Ugly Beauty”: it belonged here, even if there was no obvious cross-reference with the Handel that preceded it. Yes, on the first notes, your ear said, “Jazz chord,” but it was a piece that just “fit”— the ballad tempo following the lickety-split Handel, the formal structural beauty on a par with everything else. And it was the perfect lead-in to an uptempo Bach D-minor Prelude.

Beiser is herself a well-traveled eclectic. She’s not necessarily an improviser, but she’s game, and she took well to Fox’s technique of using a bassline from Bach or Scarlatti as the foundation for spontaneous invention. And they made a good stage duo: Fox in his concert formal wear of black shirt and trousers with white scarf, Beiser with long flowing dark hair, in sequined black mini-dress and knee-high, spike-heeled suede boots. This was music you could hear with your eyes: Beiser looking over her shoulder at Fox, the pianist fixing his eyes on her or the music, as they both presented pieces (or improvisations) that were new to each other. At one coda, Beiser whipped her bow toward the floor with a final downstroke and practically glared at Fox in triumph. Nailed it!

Solos and accompaniment passed back and forth. While Beiser played the long-lined and lyrical “Soledad” by Astor Piazzolla, Fox again was right there with the beautiful chord voicings, informing the tune’s melancholy. Beiser’s tone was rich and forceful throughout, turning a bit coarse only when she had to run through a Bach invention and the “Coda Blues” based on it at top speed with Fox. (Maybe not the best piece for classical cello, but good possibilities for rock guitar.) Osvaldo Golijov’s mournful “Mariel,

which Beiser had commissioned from the Argentine (and Boston-based) composer, was originally written for cello and a marimba. In Fox's arrangement, his piano took on the role of the marimba tremolo. Beiser's long, soaring lines — with slightly "out" subtle voicings from Fox — provided the dramatic high point of the night. A ripping Piazzolla tango finished the formal part of the concert, followed by an encore of Fox's variations on Ludovico Einaudi's BBC TV-ad ditty "I Gorni." Then a Scarlatti finale from the duo.

I once asked another eclectic "jazz" composer, Carla Bley, how she would classify the different music she had produced over the years. She thought for a second and then said, "Classical music. All of it." And Rahsaan Roland Kirk famously called jazz "black classical music." Whatever you call it, Fox and Beiser played all of it. Without apology.

[Photo by Kristophe Diaz]